

Review of CRP4: Agriculture, Nutrition and Health

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

In general terms the proposal develops well the case for and the structure of the CRP4 and that prospects definitely are positive for an important advancement through the CRP4. But there are many details for each of the six specific review criteria that may turn out to be important in implementation, but that cannot be developed in a proposal of any reasonable length. Therefore, as with any new venture, decisions about proceeding will have to be made with considerable uncertainty. All in all my judgement is that the proposal does make a strong systematic case for the CRP4.

SPECIFIC CRITERIA FOR REVIEWING MEGA PROGRAM PROPOSALS

1. Strategic coherence and clarity of Program objectives

The CGIAR Research Program (CRP) on Agriculture for Improved Nutrition and Health (CRP4)'s vision is stated in the proposal to be:

The [CRP4] is a research and development platform that will work to accelerate progress in improving the nutrition and health of poor people by shaping agriculture and food systems affecting those in marginal environments and those experiencing the impacts of agriculture intensification.

The basic foundation for CRP4 is the idea that agricultural practices and interventions can be better adapted than they are now to improve health and nutritional benefits and reduce health risks. This idea seems to integrate well with the work of the CGIAR, the research contributions of which to agricultural development are designed to improve food security, reduce poverty, and improve environmental sustainability, all of which are directly linked to health and nutrition. An important goal of the proposed CRP4 is to bring a stronger health and nutritional perspective to the CGIAR and its partners to better shape agrifood systems in order to increase development impacts, particularly for the poor. This is an important and coherent program objective.

The importance of agriculture for nutrition and health—in terms of both benefits and risks—is widely recognized. Recent events—global food price changes, threats of pandemics, and the transnational spread of animal diseases and pests that threaten livelihoods, health, and nutrition—have raised awareness at all levels that sectoral boundaries among disciplines and ministries can be barriers to solving crises. But cross-sectoral decision-making demands better data, information, analyses, understanding and cooperation than now exists. The current situation presents a promising opportunity for CGIAR to contribute importantly to understanding much better the links between how agriculture is practiced and how it affects health and nutrition. Much is still unknown, for example, about trade-offs among different choices in agricultural development and the impacts of those choices on nutrition and health. CRP4 is positioned to make a difference to the lives of the rural poor by (1) taking a systematic view of how agriculture, health, and nutrition interact globally, nationally, and locally; (2) addressing gaps in knowledge of these relationships; (3) developing a strong body of evidence based on rigorous research to help decision-makers evaluate trade-offs among different investments and policy options; and (4) fostering effective approaches that cross

sectoral boundaries. CRP4 represents an opportunity for collective action within the CGIAR with partners at all levels of impact pathways, from research discovery to development outputs to achieving meaningful outcomes for poor people. CRP4 also represents an opportunity to enhance links, that currently are weaker than desirable, among the agricultural, nutritional, and health, with serious implications for the effectiveness of efforts to improve health and nutrition through agriculture. Sometimes agricultural interventions have unintended negative consequences on health and nutrition, and these need to be tackled through joint agriculture, health and nutrition responses. Through CRP4, the proposal argues persuasively, the CGIAR and its partners can respond better to these challenges by spanning the boundaries of the agriculture, health, and nutritional sectors to provide research that will enhance agriculture's capacity to lead to nutritional and health benefits. This effort, if successful, will inform the broader agricultural research agenda and enhance its contribution to improved health and nutrition among the world's poor by working at the interface of the agriculture, health, and nutritional sectors, three critical pillars for development.

2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact

To attempt to achieve the CRP4 vision, the proposed program is organized around five components. The first two of these focus primarily on nutritional solutions—with expected impact on both nutrition and health; the third focuses on health; and the last two are intended to allow the nutritional and health solutions developed in the first three components to be delivered through cost-effective programs and informed policies that reach and have positive impacts on the target poor populations. The five components are:

1. Nutrition-sensitive value chain
2. Biofortification
3. Control of agriculture-associated diseases
4. Integrated agriculture, health, and nutrition programs
5. Policy and decision-making across agriculture, health, and nutrition

The strategy to focus on these five components seems sound. The proposal discusses each of them systematically. These discussions are promising regarding the potential for CRP4 to help promote, coordinate, and undertake cutting-edge research on interactions among agriculture, nutrition, and health as a way to better catalyze nutritional, health, and agricultural benefits. These discussions place emphasis on specific activities that promise to permit concrete progress and that in many cases build extensively on already-existing CGIAR interests and strengths. Emphasis also will be placed on forging partnerships and strengthening the connection between agriculture and health organizations to exploit synergies in research, policy, and practice. Developing these relations beyond the CGIAR is likely to be challenging, but the effort seems well worthwhile. All in all, the proposal is sufficiently concrete in terms of focus and persuasive about the possibilities of considerable impacts, particularly in light of the considerable existing losses due to poor nutrition and agriculture-associated diseases that are documented in the proposal.

3. Quality of science

The proposal lays out very systematically the activities, outputs and outcomes of each of the five program components. This presentation is very clear for each of the five components (and in some case, subcomponents) with regard to what are the: rationale, objectives and research questions; impact activities; integration with other CRPs; CGIAR centers involved and partnership arrangements; capacity development; gender focus; communications and advocacy; monitoring and evaluation and learning; and opportunities and risks. Based on these presentations, the quality of science generally appears very high. But with so many objective and activities for the five project components, it is not possible for the proposal to provide much detail about exactly how the many activities will be undertaken. And often in such research, the “devil is in the details.” A number of the activities, for example, involve the assessment or evaluation or monitoring of processes and programs. This is very commendable. But the quality of the assessments, evaluations and monitoring depends on details related to existing information, new information to be collected, use of systematic frameworks, and use of appropriate estimation procedures. It would be almost impossible to provide all these details for all the activities in the proposal. But in the absence of such details, the information on which to base a judgment about the quality of the science is limited to inferences based on how systematically are the more general presentations of the program components, how well thought-through and innovative does the overall proposed program seem, and what are the track records of the participants. On these bases, subject to the caveat above about the limited details, the quality of the science appears to be potentially very high.

4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management

The proposal rightly notes that CRP4 will necessarily involve the participation of many partners in the design and implementation of the program’s activities. A program that aims to integrate health and nutritional objectives into agricultural interventions and also to bring insights from agricultural research into health and nutritional interventions will require input and participation from partners in all three sectors, with stakeholders in these sectors ranging from governmental agencies and NGOs to research institutions and private companies. The proposal identifies three groups of important partners, with the importance among the three differing among different activities:

- 1) **“Enablers” of sectoral and cross-sectoral programs:** Enablers include policy and decision makers and investors at different levels, including governments and intergovernmental agencies at international, regional, and national levels; international and regional development banks and development investors; and different public and private organizations engaged in policy, decision-making, and advocacy.
- 2) **Development implementers:** Development implementers include governmental departments and NGOs implementing agricultural and rural development programs that seek to improve health and nutritional outcomes. The ambition is to expand, enhance, and deepen the partnerships with these partners.
- 3) **Research partners:** CRP4 will build on and expand partnerships for agriculture and health and for agriculture and nutrition with a variety of universities and advanced research institutes in developing and developed countries.

The project proposal states that the project plans to expand partnerships around new tools and approaches for intersectoral knowledge and evidence, the overall partnership principle will be to expand the role and capacities of developing-country partners, and to help nurture cross-sectoral collaboration, CRP4 will immediately undertake a communications strategy that will include a dimension designed to raise awareness and understanding of cross-sectoral agriculture, health, and nutritional opportunities and to influence attitudes and behaviors by changing mindsets and incentives for action. It recognizes that for the ambitions of CRP4 to be met, such partnerships will be critical. Important foundations for ongoing partnerships apparently were established and strengthened in the preparation of this proposal, with 12 CGIAR Centers and multiple partners from agriculture, health, and nutritional communities actively participating in contributing to the proposal development through written contributions, stakeholder and partner workshops, and oral discussions. But the proposal also notes that this program proposes a much closer partnership among the agricultural, health, and nutritional research and development communities than seen previously. The proposal states that CRP4 will build on past successes of CGIAR and partners working together on agriculture, health, and nutritional programs, seek to complement a number of new international initiatives for improving agriculture-nutrition and agriculture-health integration and synergies, and develop/use new approaches to cross-sectoral work.

The development of these expanded partnerships is central to the CRP4 and is a major challenge, as is reflected by considering the range of partners noted in the three groups above. I perceive that historically at times it has been difficult to foment strong partnerships among many or most of the CGIAR Centers, but for CRP4 the ambition is much broader. While it is the case that there is a foundation on which to build based on previous partnerships and development of this proposal, exactly how the much more extensive and richer partnerships envisaged will be nurtured and developed is not entirely clear. I understand that a major dimension of the strategy to be followed will be efforts to develop broad partnerships for most or all of the individual activities that are indicated for the five program components. Probably that is the best strategy. But any strategy faces considerable challenges. And how well broadened partnerships are established is likely not only to be a major factor in determining the success of CRP4 in reaching its goals, but have important effects on the evolution of the whole CGIAR system. There are considerable uncertainties and risks, but in my judgment these are well worth taking.

5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management

The CRP4 proposes a pragmatic joint venture arrangement between IFPRI and ILRI because IFPRI is seen as a leader in agriculture-nutrition and ILRI in agriculture-health. The proposal argues that it is important that the CGIAR has recognized leadership in both areas in order to ensure strong vision, performance, partnerships, and resource mobilization in each of these areas. The two centers can join their complementary advantages and apply these to research areas that can most benefit from a stronger integration among agriculture, health, and nutrition. This collaborative advantage is claimed to be important in (1) integrating agriculture for improved nutrition and health into more comprehensive social protection and development programs, and (2) providing the evidence to support policy, investment, and program decisions.

In terms of governance, the Directors General of IFPRI and ILRI are accountable through their performance contract with the Consortium Board. Since Boards oversee the execution of the performance contract, but not the scientific program, the Directors General will report regularly to their respective Boards on the achievement of their milestones.

The key features of the governance and management arrangements are:

1. Joint performance contract with the Consortium Board: IFPRI and ILRI sign a joint performance contract with the Consortium Board for the Program with an agreed proportion of the funds allocated to each center. The two Directors General report jointly to the Consortium as per the performance contract.

2. Joint Board sub-committee: While the Center Boards provide oversight of the performance contract with the Consortium, initial oversight for the joint venture will be provided by a joint Board sub-committee of two members, one from each of IFPRI and ILRI Boards. The sub-committee will report on both science and management to both Boards.

3. Management Team: A three-person Management Team will be responsible for the initial program management. ILRI and IFPRI each will designate a senior research manager from their respective institutions as Program Directors. They will support and supervise a Managing Director of the CRP, who will be a joint IFPRI-ILRI appointment. The Managing Director will have an operational role to ensure that all program components are operating well and meeting their milestones. The Management Team will discuss with the Program Research Teams to agree on priorities for funding. The Management Team will also take responsibility for broader communication, advocacy, and resource mobilization. It will be supported by a communications expert. Responsibilities and resource allocations to these functions will be made to the lead centers by recommendation of the Management Team to the Directors General of the centers.

4. Independent Advisory Committee: A five-person Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) will be formed to support the development of collaborative, efficient, and effective science and management. The IAC will advise the Management Team and the IFPRI and ILRI Directors General on research program performance, research priorities and focus, and management and partnership issues. Nominations will be actively canvassed from participating centers and partners by the Management Team. The slate of candidates will be proposed to the joint IFPRI-ILRI Board sub-committee for decision and confirmation by their Boards. The IAC will meet with the Program Research Team to allow for maximum interaction with key players in the program. The Management Team will be required to formally respond to IAC recommendations.

5. Program Research Team: The principle mechanism for collective action across centers and partners will occur in the Program Research Team. This team will include research leaders from the five CRP components and major sub-components (probably 12–15 people). Research team leaders will be from both CGIAR centers and from key partner institutions. Provision will also be made to include selected representatives of institutions with an international mandate that have significant investments in health, nutrition, and agriculture linkages research, provided that these institutions integrate their research programs in the CRP4 strategy and work plan and that they commit significant financial and human resources. The Program Research Team will be an active forum for discussing research priorities, plans, progress, and linkages between different components and initiatives outside the program. The program of work and budget for different research components will be discussed within this team, including priorities and trade-offs

across different activities. This group will meet twice a year in person; sub-groups will meet more frequently virtually. The Managing Director will oversee the implementation arrangements and performance contracts with principal investigators from CGIAR centers and partner institutions working in the program.

6. A **Stakeholder Forum** will be held biennially and be linked to the GCARD process. It will serve to reinforce stakeholder engagement with the Program and provide feedback on the relevance and effectiveness of the work that will feed into discussion at GCARD. It will be an open forum; sponsored participation by key partners may be budgeted into component activities.

Design of governance and management arrangements presents a challenge because of the need to balance a number of concerns about credibility, responsibility, cooperation and research productivity. The proposed program management structure seems generally to strike reasonable balances. I have but two caveats/ questions. (1) Will this structure bring in sufficiently well the health and nutritional communities or might it be possible to engage representatives of these communities more extensively? (2) Is the tradeoff between efforts to have cooperative participatory management and research productivity about right, or might it be desirable to have, say, fewer interactions (e.g., meetings with less frequency)? (3) Could the extent of the systematic monitoring and evaluation processes and how they would function be made clearer? For example will the IAC actually undertake systematic evaluation? (I perceive not.) If not, would it be better to have some systematic relatively arms-length evaluation incorporated into the project?

6. Clear accountability and financial soundness, and efficiency of governance

These considerations are very difficult to assess for a program of this magnitude and complexity. It appears that the financial demands are significant, but if the project goals are attained the impacts will be substantial and positively integrate the CGIAR system much more with the health and nutritional communities, which would seem definitely advantageous. On a general level, the budget requested appears credible and defensible, given the problem being addressed and the partnerships involved.

There is nothing that stands out as strange to me in the budgets that are presented. But it is not clear, and I am not sure what information would make it clear, how clear is the accountability and efficiency of governance.